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WOMEN AT THE EXTERNAL BORDERS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

migreurop

The xenophobic doomsayers who foretold a "migrant rush for Europe" defended their sinister portents with images in which women were conspicuous by their absence. According to their predictions, there would be masses of young men flocking to our societies, which would then see our hard-won balance of the sexes undone, both in number and in power relations. The huge media coverage and politicisation of the "Cologne Sex Attacks" (31 December 2015) has also played a major role in turning German policy against migrants. When migrants are portrayed as predatory males due to their "cultural background", refusing to accommodate them is somehow defensible.

This rationale is of course skewed by many ideological biases, but also due to factual and statistical errors. New entries to the European Union (EU) comprise both men and women, with the latter making up almost half of all migrants settling in the EU. This is not a new phenomenon. In the early 1930s, when France was the main country to welcome migrants, women already accounted for over 40% of new arrivals.

The way women are made invisible is not, of course, unique to immigration. In this instance, however, it is also used to bolster a drive to exclude certain men. Female migrants are indeed almost excluded from the "migrant flows" that receive the most media attention: more than 90 % of boat people from the Mediterranean or unaccompanied minors entering the EU are male. This, incidentally, also helps to defend the "machismo" that typifies the repressive measures against migrants. The "war on migrants" is thus portrayed as a male issue! Yet, migrant women, far from having their presumed "vulnerability" taken into consideration, also get caught in the trap of increasingly militarised borders. The violence entailed in the repression of migration accentuates and multiplies that of the social divisions between men and women.

These breaches of women's rights are founded on their symbolic negation: the disappearance of women's voices from the dominant discourse on migration itself leads to the relative excision of women from staking a claim to the right to emigrate.

Barriers to movement and sexual violence

Migration policies are not gender-neutral. At the border, policies will often be applied differently to men and women. Although both sexes are affected by repressive measures irrespective of their gender, migrants sometimes find that the impact differs depending on their gender, ethnic origin, the colour of their skin or indeed their sexual orientation – all categories that are fundamental to the power relations and dominance that underpin policies aimed at restricting movement.

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PHOTOGRAPH:
ENTRANCE TO THE VIAL HOTSPOT *(KIOS, GREECE, 2016)*

Barriers to movement and sexual violence

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Understanding women's experience of migration enables a fuller grasp of the far-reaching consequences of European migration policies and their externalisation. Despite the fact that women have been migrating for millennia, migration by women is often airbrushed out, reduced to isolated cases or made into an issue to be "re-discovered". The matter of women's visibility as migrants is linked not to their physical presence but to how they are seen. For decades, women have witnessed hindrances to their own movement proliferate, but they are also agents for change in their own right, pushing back against the security-based militarisation of migration control.

Women - of all ages - make up 48% of the total number of international migrants and 50% of refugees (General Assembly of the United Nations, 2016). However, these figures should not mask the fact that women face even greater limitations on their movement than men, from the moment they leave their countries of origin, while travelling and at borders. Women also face greater risks during sea crossings – due to the places assigned to them on vessels, their physical condition and other factors – and for this reason are proportionately more likely to die of drowning than men (IOM, 2018).

The security-focused migration policies of the European Union and the externalisation of these policies exacerbates the forces of domination levelled at women attempting to migrate, making their journeys longer, more dangerous and more costly. Such policies trap female migrants in militarized border areas where fundamental rights are not respected and impunity reigns.

The example of the border between Morocco and Spain illustrates how the handling of migration by security forces leads to different restrictions being imposed on men's and women's movements and emboldens sexual violence against women. Although a variety of methods are used to get across this border – scaling the fences around Ceuta or Melilla, crossing the sea, hiding in a car – women are generally assigned to the maritime route as crossing by car is the most expensive and the "leap" over the fence is perceived as being "too hard" or "too physically demanding" for women.

Gender stereotyping is thus a limiting factor in how women get across borders. Waiting times before attempting a crossing in an inflatable craft range from several weeks to a few years.

While they wait, women (and men) are confined to camps in the woods, such as in the zone of Nador, close to the Spanish enclave of Melilla, or in apartments such as those around Tangier. In these spaces, women very frequently become victims of sexual extorsion or rape by the men involved in the smugglers' networks. Reports of sexual violence also point to other culprits: soldiers leading the charge against so-called irregular immigration, local civilians or travel companions. Such accounts by women waiting to cross the border, both in this region and via the Libyan route, are so recurrent that they reveal sexual violence in these places to be systematic.

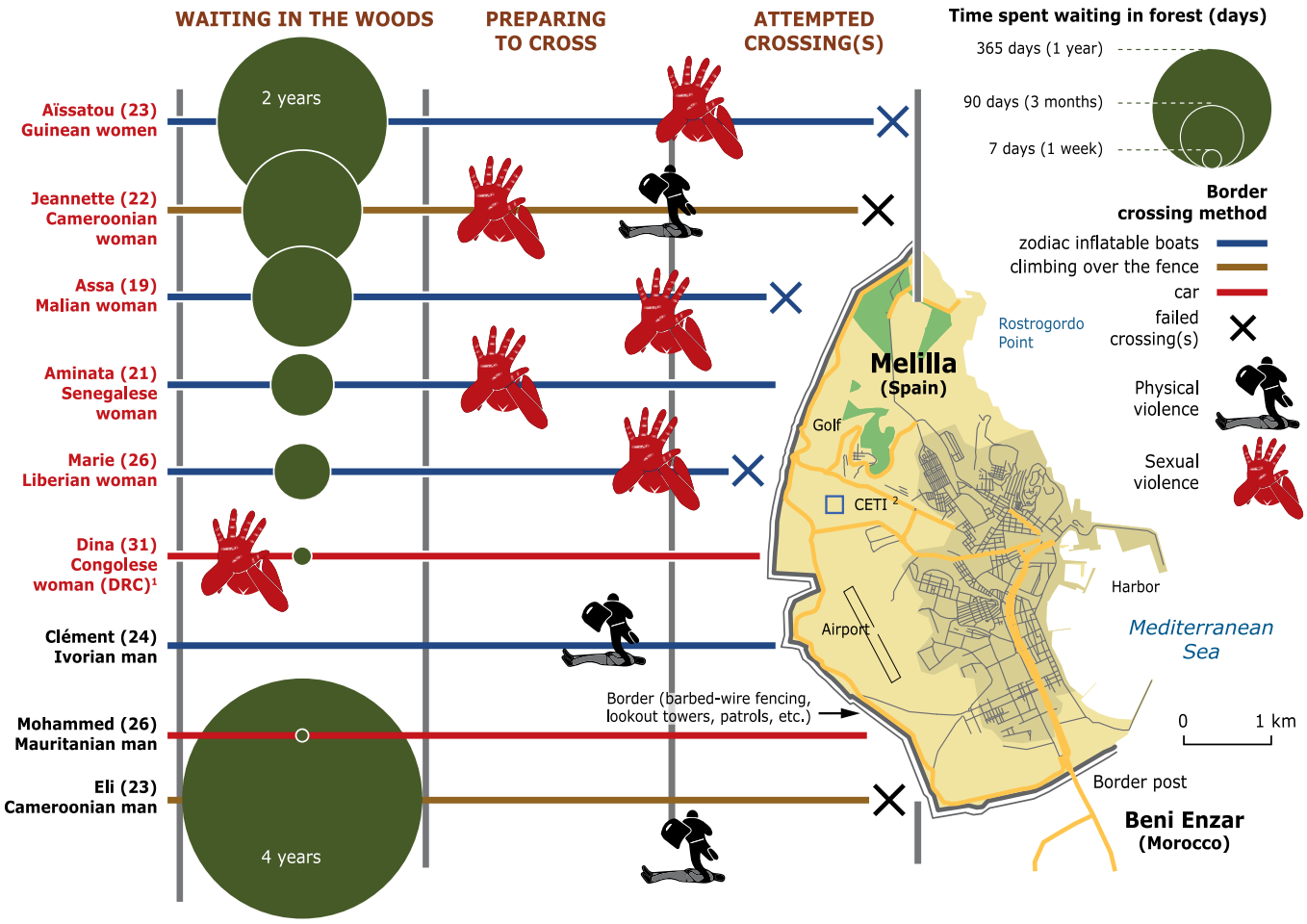
In border zones, sexual violence seems to be an unavoidable part of the journey for women seeking to emigrate or travel. Management of the border and the mechanisms in place to prevent or allow passage are generally controlled by men. Women thus depend on these men in order to complete their intended journeys – leaving them far more exposed to having their bodies objectified and to numerous instances of sexual violence being perpetrated against them. In some cases, this leads to unwanted pregnancies, unsafe deliveries and, in the long term, difficult circumstances for children and their mothers.

WOMEN MADE PRISONERS IN GREEK CAMPS

The arrangement between Turkey and the EU struck in 2016 (*see Migreurop Brief #5*) left thousands of refugees stranded on the Greek islands of Chios, Kos, Leros, Lesbos and Samos, in overcrowded European camps known as *"hotspots"* (*see Migreurop Brief #4*), where the substandard and unsafe conditions leave women exposed to specific forms of vulnerability and insecurity. The infamous camp of Moria on the island of Lesbos, which was designed to hold 3000 people, sheltered 7000 individuals as of July 2018. Women, even those who arrived alone, must share living quarters with men they do not know, with no personal space of their own. NGOs have described distributing incontinence pads to adult women who are too afraid to go to the toilet at night because of mixed toilet and shower facilities. The squalor and lack of hygiene lead to serious health problems. But medical and psychological support is woefully inadequate, and the situation has deteriorated since the Greek government took over the management of medical services from NGOs.

There are just five doctors on the island of Lesbos, and women's access to them is extremely limited. Contraception or abortion are almost entirely inaccessible. Any care offered to victims of violence is undermined by procedures that lack confidentiality or suitable support services, with the result that many women choose to say nothing about the violence they suffer. According to the current legislation, it should be possible to transfer "vulnerable" people from the hotspots onto the Greek mainland. However, identifying such individuals is a vague and haphazard process, sometimes leading to women with "visible vulnerabilities" (pregnancies, disabilities) being refused transfer to Athens. Women with "invisible vulnerabilities" (trauma linked to violence they have endured) receive no medical, psychological, social or legal support. These centres - which were introduced in 2015 as places to identify and thus ensure protection for the most vulnerable – in fact operate as coercive sorting centres, giving rise to new rights violations and gender-based violence (Freedman, 2017).

Trapped between Morocco and Spain, women at the border face several types of violence as well as obstacles



Even though they may take the same route, men and women's journeys differ significantly. For example, how long they remain stuck on the border, how they cross, how they pay for their passage, the types of violence they experience, and whether or not they succeed in getting across at all – are often determined according to their gender.

According to research carried out at the border between Morocco and Spain, sexual violence against women is systematic there. It generally takes women longer to get across the border, if they make it.

1.Violence taking place on the Algeria-Morocco border, and a reminder that women are also subject to such violence at other points on their journey.
2.CETI (Centro de Estancia Temporal de Immigrantes) / Temporary Accommodation Centre for Migrants

Source : the data relating to these journeys was gathered by Elsa Tyszler in Morocco and Melilla between February 2015 and July 2017; www.openstreetmap.org/; the symbol for sexual violence was created by Datacrafted from Noun Project.

PHOTOGRAPH:
ARRIVAL AT THE PORT OF POZZALLO *(SICILY, 2015)*

Human trafficking is being instrumentalized

In the 1990s, the subject of human trafficking, which came to be defined as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring by means of the threat or use of force, of deception, or of other forms of coercion for the purpose of exploitation" entered into the public debate. Since the year 2000, an extensive European and international legislative corpus has gradually established international commitments, of which the best-known example continues to be the Palermo Protocol. Adopted in 2000, the Palermo Protocol instituted a binding legal instrument whose scope has been expanded and clarified in recent years with the addition of numerous international documents.

At the borders of the European Union, violence against women and trafficking in particular is often misused to political ends. The EU's main course of action in the area of migration continues to be repression by way of the confinement, triage and removal of the migrants who come knocking at its doors, while the chances of so-called legal entry shrink away. The emphasis is put on the fight against "smugglers" - who have been identified as the main cause of irregular migration, when NGOs are not accused of the same malfeasance. Thus, major security operations are deployed on Europe's borders under the guise of liberating migrants - including women and children - from the grip of the networks of smugglers and traffickers in human persons. For this reason, in Nador, Morocco, where many have gathered in camps in the forest in order to attempt the crossing into Spain, there are frequent police raids, allegedly in order to "protect" vulnerable individuals. The simple reality is that migrants there are forcibly moved on and driven far away from the Morocco-Spain border, without any consideration of their personal circumstances. It seems that the conflation of combatting irregular immigration and human trafficking is being wilfully maintained in order to legitimise the high level of repression and the numourous acts of refoulements.

Similarly, there seem to be no effective measures in place on the borders of Europe to detect or protect those migrants in the grip of a trafficking network. In the hotspots in Greece or Italy, for example, people are held and forced to wait for several months in camps with abysmal sanitation. No spaces are provided in which to statements from those women (and men) seeking to escape from the clutches of gangs at their own initiative; no measures have been taken to receive migrants individually or in confidence. Most of those in detention do not have access to the procedure for requesting asylum. Despite a considerable legal arsenal, no effective protection is offered. Thus, despite the existence of a "protocol on detecting victims of human trafficking", it would appear that in Ceuta and Melilla the protection of women singled out as being potential victims of human trafficking is nothing more than political posturing since no specific action is taken. The director of the Temporary Accommodation Centre for Migrants (CETI) of Melilla explains that "the police does not wish to transfer women who have been victims of trafficking to the Spanish mainland for fear of creating a pull factor", although, in his view, "all sub-Saharan women are victims of trafficking" (GADEM et al, 2015; Tyszler, 2018). The instrumentalization of migrant women lies at the heart of this discourse and of practices that contravene it. Women are either "victims to be rescued" - when it is convenient to describe them as such in order to justify tougher migration control policies - or "swindling liars" when they have to be given protection. Nevertheless, a view of women in exile as mere "victims" of smugglers or gangs masks the full extent of the violence that arises as a result of increasingly repressive migration policies. Such policies strengthen and legitimise the position and role of smugglers and networks, who are ultimately responding to a need: the need to travel. They take advantage of the difficulties and vulnerabilities of migrants who are faced with the sealing off of Europe's borders.

Although in official discourse human trafficking is considered to be among the gravest infringements of human rights, the fight against irregular immigration takes precedence over all other international commitments. Despite a constantly expanding international legal framework, despite the priority afforded to combatting human trafficking by the UN and despite a budgetary envelope commensurate with the stature of their sponsor, very few individuals actually receive any effective protection. On the contrary, European policies for combatting irregular immigration lead squarely to the "vulnerabilization" of migrants, who become easy targets for networks of traffickers as a result of these policies. A great many women try to escape them and attempt to regain their freedom of movement, often risking their lives to do so. Instead of strengthening their capacity for action, the implementation of the legal arsenal on human trafficking relegates women to the status of victim, further diminishing their chances of migrating freely.

The bibliography can be found in the *Publications* section on Migreurop's website www.migreurop.org.

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Migreurop is a network of associations, activists and researchers, with a presence in around twenty countries across Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The network strives to raise awareness of and to oppose policies that marginalise and exclude migrants, notably, detention in camps, various forms of displacement and the closure of borders, as well as the externalisation of migration controls by the European Union and its Member States. In this way, the network contributes to defending migrants' fundamental rights (including the right '*to leave any country, including their own*') and to promoting freedom of movement and settlement.

www.migreurop.org

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